

Margaret

By C. S.

THE street was feebly lighted, but by the glare from the public-house at the corner I could see her coming towards me, holding a jug in one hand and running the other along the railings in front of the houses as a boy does a stick. She walked swiftly but cautiously, and rather as if measuring a distance by counting the paces. As I came nearer, she shrank against the railings, and almost stopped; but as soon as I had passed she went on again more quickly than before. She must have heard me stop to look after her; for she paused for a moment, and turned her head as if listening, and then glided on through the darkness into the glare; and, as she went into the public-house I caught sight of a tangle of heavy golden hair hanging down her back.

Presently she came back, keeping close to the houses as before, and in front of one of them about half-way down the street she stopped, and passed her hand along the tops of the railings as if feeling for something. She seemed satisfied, and pushing open the area gate went down the steps. "Is that you, Maggie?" cried a woman's voice—and a flood of light came up from the area. A door was hastily slammed, and all was dark again; but as I passed the house I noticed that the spike on the top of one of the railings was missing.

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As I came round the corner by the public-house, I heard a hoarse shouting and clashing of pewter pots ; and looking in through the ill-fitting flap doors, I saw a confused crowd of dirty, greasy men, struggling to get near the counter. I walked on more quickly down the street, hoping to be in time.

"Stop," I cried suddenly to the little figure creeping along by the houses. "You mustn't go there to-night. Stay here and give me the jug, and I'll bring the beer back to you."

She started, and caught hold of the railings with one hand. "Who are you?" she said, turning a pair of curiously dull eyes towards me.

"Come," said I, "stay here ; I'll tell you all about that when I come back ;" and I took hold of the jug.

"Why shouldn't I get it to-night? I go nearly every night, and often during the day as well ; I know the way—and it isn't far."

"It's full of drunken men," I said ; "you'd better stay here."

She gave up the jug and leant listlessly against the railings, keeping her eyes on the ground.

"Don't be long please ; they're waiting for me at home. It's the first door on the left, and there's 'Jug and Bottle Entrance' on the glass in raised letters."

"This is an empty house," I said ; "you can sit on the steps while I'm gone."

When I came back I found her standing by the door with one hand on the bell-handle.

"Did you say this house was empty?" she asked, as I held out the beer jug.

"Yes," I answered, glancing at the dirty windows in which bills were posted ; "but why?"

"Because I've been ringing the bell all the time you've been
away,

away, for fun ; and because I don't like being left all alone in the dark street."

"You queer child ! Besides it isn't dark a bit here—there's a lovely moon."

She gave a little shiver, and was silent.

"Why don't you take your beer ?" and I offered her the jug once more.

She groped towards me and put her hands on my shoulders turning those large dull eyes up to mine.

"Can't you see I'm blind ?" said she impatiently.

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"It's rather wet to sit here to-night"—and I looked doubtfully at the doorway up which the wind blew the rain in gusts. She sat down on the top step, and spread her dress over the damp stone.

"Sit down here ; we can lean against the pillar and be as dry as anything."

"How did you know there was a pillar ?"

She pouted contemptuously. "Do you think I haven't my ways of seeing as well as you ? I could describe this street much better than you for all your wonderful sight ; besides, I found out all about this particular doorway that night when you first went and got the beer."

"Mind the jug !" I cried ; but I was too late ; for with a sweep of her arm the jug toppled over, and the beer rushed down the steps across the pavement into the gutter. She bit her lip. "Now don't crow over me : it doesn't follow that I shouldn't have done it even if I could see."

I kissed her forehead lightly.

"Never mind, dear heart ; sit still. I won't be long getting some more."

"How

“How aunt would have abused poor Maggie if she hadn’t had her beer,” she remarked, as I sat down again after putting the jug against the door for safety.

“I shan’t call you Maggie, as they call you that at home. I shall call you Margaret—Margaret with the glorious hair.”

“Do you think it’s really pretty—very pretty I mean?” she asked.

“Pretty,” I echoed; “why it’s the most wonderful and beautiful thing I have ever seen.”

She gave a nervous little laugh, and shook her head so that her face was hidden in masses of gold.

“I wish I could see it: I can only feel it and know I have plenty of it;” and she frisked her head round so that the warm waves of colour rippled down my coat into my lap. “You may cut a little piece off if you like,” she added with a sigh. I got out a pair of pocket scissors, and she folded her hands before her.

“You may take one skein; and mind you don’t cut it off too near my head and leave an ugly gap with a stump at the top.”

I put my hands gently under the soft warm hair, and choosing a strand rather darker than the rest cut a piece off the end.

“Let me feel it,” she said—and I put the wisp into her hand.

She nodded contentedly and began fumbling at one of her stockings. I heard a snap, and presently she gave me a long cotton thread with which I tied the hair while she held it at each end.

“Aunt talks about giving up the house,” she said, jerking her head in the direction of her home; “the lodgings don’t pay much, and I heard her say that if she did she’d have to try and get me into some place for blind people—an asylum or something. Isn’t it horrible?”

“Fancy shutting a sweet little golden darling like you up in
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an asylum!" I cried: "it makes me sick to think of it." And catching her in my arms I pulled her back, and covered her face and neck and hair with kisses.

"Good-night, little golden thing," I said as she got up to go: "I shall come to-morrow as usual." And I put the jug into her hand, and set her by the railings.

"Take care of that little piece of my hair," she called; and I watched her gliding by the houses till she vanished down the area of her home.

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But alas! It was fully a fortnight before I was able to visit the doorway again, and after waiting there in vain for some time I walked down the deserted street to the house where the spike was missing from the top of one of the railings.

The windows were quite dark, and on the door just above the letter-box was a piece of paper freshly pasted on. I went up the steps and struck a match and read:

"TO LET

FOR KEYS APPLY No. 3 NEWLAND STREET."

I walked slowly back till I came to the empty house. The sight of the familiar doorway was too much for me, and sitting down I leant against the pillar and gave way to my grief.



